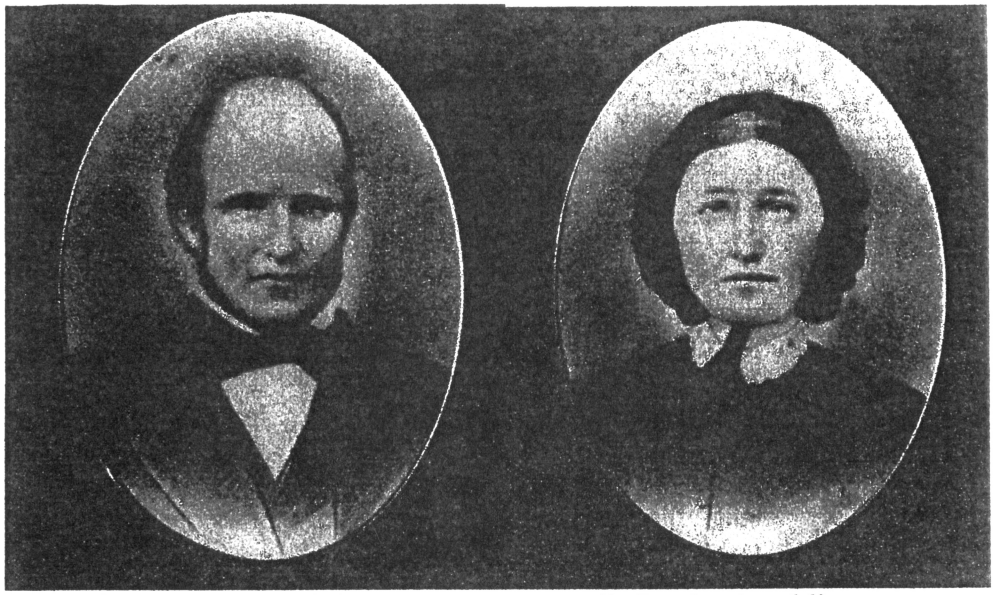
CHRISTIAN HERITAGE OF THE AESCHIMAN FAMILY

Great grandfather, Christian Peter Aeschlimann, was born in 1819 in Langnau in the Emmental region south and east of Berne. Our Aeschlimann ancestors can be traced back to the 16th century living in the Emmental region. According to Stella Aeschliman's history of her father, the Christian Peter's family was baptized in the German Reformed church. In 1849 he married Elisabeth Gerber and they had a son Christian Jr., born in 1850, and a daughter Louise, born in 1852. Elisabeth died in October 1853 and Christian Peter took his two young children and moved west to the French speaking part of Switzerland in Canton Neuchatel where there was a community of Mennonites.

The history of Canton Neuchatel is interesting and undoubtedly influenced the character of our family. The Mennonite community was in the Jura Mountains along the French border of Northwestern Switzerland in the vicinity of French speaking villages of LeLocle, La Chaux-de-Fonds and Sonnenberg. This area had been a refuge for Mennonites and Reformed Church members fleeing persecution since the 16th century. The Anabaptist movement began in Zurich during the Reformation when a group of theologians broke away from the Lutheran church over the issues of adult baptism, separation of church and state, freedom of religion and pacifism. Many Anabaptists became known as Mennonites after Menno Simons, who led a parallel movement in the Netherlands. Persecution by state officials followed and many moved to the area around Berne and to the Jura Mountains. Although there were no violent forms of persecution used against them in this area, there were restrictions placed on them. Since they were not married in the state church nor were their children baptized by a state church clergyman, they were considered illegitimate and were not considered legal heirs of any property their parents might possess. (This law was changed in some areas beginning in 1880.) They were allowed to farm only on the higher slopes of the mountains where the soil was dry and stony. This soil was suitable for potatoes and grain such as barley, wheat and oats and for pasture for cows. They became known for their talent in making cheese. Rather than build churches that could attract unwanted attention, they worshipped in homes and barns. These were strong people with a strong faith tempered by the hardships they experienced because of their beliefs. This strong faith was evident in the families that later immigrated to the US and was evident in their practical Christian service to others in the communities where they settled.

A year after arriving in le Locle, in May, 1854 Christian Peter married 22 year old Julia Roulet. According to research by Floyd Roulet, her family was Mennonite and had lived in that area since the 17th century. It appears Christian Peter joined the Mennonite church when he married Julia. They had ten children from this marriage. Three children died at a young age and seven survived; Marie, born 1855, Fred 1859, Sam 1860, Paul 1862, Rose 1864, Sophia 1867 and Earnest 1871. Earnest was three years old when Julia died



Christian Peter Aeschlimann Julia Roulet Aeschlimann

Christian Peter, Elisabeth Gerber and Julia Roulet Aeschlimann Children

le Locle 1881

(back row) Louise (Aeschlimann) & husband Rodalph Heger, Earnest, Sam, Christian Jr. & wife Marie (Heger) Aeschlimann
(second Row) Fred & wife Rosina (Rubin) Aeschlimann, Marie (Aeschlimann) & husband Christian Ummel
(front row) Rose, Paul & Sophia Aeschlimann

The Move to the USA

Julia Roulet Aeschlimann's brother Philip was a Mennonite pastor. In 1867 Philip led a group of 14 Mennonite families to the US to seek a better life. They settled in Ohio for a few years and then moved on to Iowa where land was available for homestead. In 1873 they settled in Pulaski Iowa near an Amish Mennonite settlement. There was correspondence back and forth to the relatives in le Locle about the good land and the freedom they had to worship as they pleased without interference. The US was a unique country as it did not have a State Church and did not try to control the religion of its citizens or the way they worshipped.
In 1880 19 year old Sam sailed to the US to join his Uncle Philip in Iowa. Others in the family wanted to join him and in 1881 Sam went back to Switzerland and returned to the USA with his younger brother Paul, sister Rose and 9 year old Earnest. Within the next three years all of his brothers and sisters, except Marie, joined him in Iowa. They were all single except Fred who had married Rosina Rubin in le Locle in 1882. They had one son, Arnold, when they came to Iowa in 1883

In 1886, Sam, Rose and Earnest moved from Iowa to Washington Territory and rented land near Almota. The next year Grandpa Fred, Rosina and their three sons, Arnold, Lou and Will, followed them. With them was younger sister Sophia who had married Chris Schlunegar, a widower with one daughter. Grandpa Fred settled in Almota with his family and worked as a wheelwright and carpenter. Sons Ed and Sam were born there. In 1893 he rented some school land above Almota and began to farm. Two more sons, Ira and John were born there. In 1899, he bought land 2 miles north of the Onecho School and moved his family of seven sons to the farm where his grandson John Aeschliman is now living. Two daughters, Mary and Martha, completed the family.

Fred and Rose Aeschliman Family

(back row) Ed, Lou, Arnold, Will photo 1904
(front row) John, Ira, Fred, Mary, Martha, Rose, Sam

The Onecho Church

According to an oral history by Milt Ensley, son of one of the earliest pioneers in the Onecho community, a Methodist circuit rider began visiting the community in the late 1870's. He would hold services in homes and in the school house after it was built. With the coming of the Swiss Mennonites, the two groups worshipped together in the school house. Milt Ensley noted the Mennonites were good singers. The leader would get the pitch from a tuning fork; lead out and the rest would sing four parts. Stella Aeschliman said her father Sam was often the leader in singing. Some winters he taught a class of young people to sing notes and then the four parts of a song. The congregational singing was like a choir with all four parts being heard. This continued into the 1940's and 50's. With the change in church music to singing praise choruses, four part congregational singing is not heard much anymore.

In 1891, the Mennonites decided they needed a permanent pastor. One of Grandpa's brothers, Paul, volunteered to serve in that capacity and went back to the Mennonite Seminary in Halstead, Kansas for training. He attended for two years, returning to Onecho in 1893 with his bride Phoebe. That summer the First Mennonite Church of Colfax was chartered. Charter members were:

Earnest Aeschliman
Fred and Rose (Rubin) Aeschliman
Paul and Phoebe Aeschliman
Samuel Aeschliman
Jacob and Magdalena (Naffziger) Kaufman
Magdalena Miller
Chris and Pauline Naffziger (brother of Magdalena Kaufman)
Joseph Naffziger (brother of Magdalena Kaufman)
Frederica Nauert
Ed Reinhard
Louis Roulet (father of Harry Roulet)
Magdalena Rubin (mother of Rose Aeschliman and Will Rubin)
Will and Rose (Aeschliman) Rubin
Jacob and Lizzie Stevick
Joseph and Katie Stevick
John and Mary Unziger

Uncle Paul Aeschliman was elected the first pastor. He served 43 years until 1936. In the early days he would preach the sermon in German and then preach it again in English. In addition to being pastor at Onecho, Uncle Paul also served in various capacities in the Pacific District Conference of the Mennonite Church on various committees and as Minister at Large for the conference. In addition, to his responsibilities as pastor, Uncle Paul farmed his 80 acres one mile east of the church.

In 1895 group decided to build a church building to accommodate the increased number in the community. Since the two groups were about equal in numbers, there was a question of who would own the building. According to Milton Ensley, the Methodist group decided that since the Mennonite men were good carpenters, they should build and own the church and the Methodists would help. They would all worship together in the new church as had been the practice during the last couple of years. That relationship continued for over 60 years with the Mennonite pastor preaching three Sundays a month and the Methodist pastor, if one was available, preaching the other Sunday. Although it was officially the 1st Mennonite Church of Colfax, it was usually called the Onecho Church. In 1964 by vote of the congregation, the name was changed to the Onecho Bible Church.

From its beginning the church has been a central point of much of the life of the Onecho community. It has been faithful to the preaching and teaching of God's Word as envisioned by those who started the church in 1893. It has a world-wide ministry through the many missionaries and ministries it supports. In the decades following World War II with the decline of the farm population and the improvement of the rural roads, many rural churches closed. The Onecho Church has gone against that trend and has increased its membership as it has drawn worshippers from the surrounding towns and communities. The original church was rebuilt in 1926 and has been expanded twice since then.

Researched by Wayne Aeschiman, July 2009